Powering projects

How clean energy can fuel Indigenous independence

by Chantel Henderson


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THIS SUMMER marks 150 years since Canada's Confederation, but it also marks more than 400 years of colonization. Indigenous people continue to fight for the right to prosper through land claims, economic development opportunities and cultural revitalization. In many communities across Canada, that prosperity is coming in the form of renewable energy development.

I learned about the potential of renewable energy development in Indigenous communities, or "Aboriginal power," through the 20/20 Catalyst program, a three-month course hosted by Lumos Energy that helps Indigenous communities launch clean energy projects.

To apply to the program, we had to pitch our own idea for a renewable energy project. I had been searching for a way to incorporate my education, skills and experience as an Indigenous woman into a business idea. I pitched the idea of creating a solar cooperative in Kahnawake, Que. That idea morphed into developing a renewable energy cooperative.

During the 20/20 Catalyst program, we learned about clean energy projects that were developed by Indigenous communities from across Canada, how they used the land they own to their communities' benefit while having the power to determine their own future through economic independence. One of the best examples is the T'Sou-ke First Nation in B.C. This completely self-sufficient community generates enough power to sell back to the grid. They have a smoke house, a solar farm, a solar hot water system, an electric car charging station and a wasabi greenhouse. Their community was recognized as one of the most sustainable communities in Canada and created an ecotourism program that attracts tourists, schools and municipalities, generating more income. Their dream was based on the Seventh Generation concept, which means planning sustainably, incorporating traditional values and respecting the planet so that those living seven generations from now are as well off as we are today.

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Projects such as this and the First Nation owned and led run-of-the-river hydro project in Dokis First Nation in Ontario are important to the health, livelihoods and prosperity of Indigenous communities across Canada. However, many Indigenous communities across Canada's North rely on diesel generators for power, which can have significant consequences for their health, local economies and the climate in general. In Ontario, Indigenous communities such as Aamjiwnaang First Nation, Attawapiskat First Nation and Mikisew Cree First Nation are surrounded by toxic environments created by nearby manufacturing and resource extractive industries.

These examples of environmental racism have left these once independent and self-sufficient communities incapable of supporting themselves or their families because the land, air and water that their livelihoods depended on is now polluted. Indigenous women and children are often at higher risk from these kinds of environmental hazards. The social and economic fallout of environmental degradation affects Indigenous women and children first, such as through the shift from now polluted traditional foods to unhealthy and expensive imported food in many communities. With limited or non-existent incomes, these communities become dependent on the government for assistance, and a cycle of poverty ensues.

Through the 20/20 Catalyst program, I realized I can make a difference by finding ways to help my people, in particular women, to become economically self-sufficient by encouraging them to create their own businesses based on their talents, knowledge and experience. With the right resources, Indigenous women can ensure a healthy community for the next seven generations that incorporates people, planet and profit. Clean energy projects are a way to help achieve this. Self-determination of our lands, sovereignty over our communities and support for our women will ensure the development of healthy, sustainable, self-sufficient Indigenous communities for years to come. ■

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